



<http://www.eschoolnews.com>

Contents Copyright 2006 eSchool News. All rights reserved.

## Researchers try new way to teach internet literacy

**By Laura Ascione, Assistant Editor, eSchool News**  
**October 1, 2006**

This fall, students at a handful of schools in Connecticut and South Carolina will learn how to read, understand, and critically evaluate internet search results using an experimental new technique. The project is part of a three-year, federally funded study by researchers at the University of Connecticut and Clemson University that aims to find a way to improve the internet literacy skills of disadvantaged students.

If the results from an earlier part of the study are any indication, it's an area of urgent need. Fewer than 10 percent of the study's participants always check the accuracy of the information they read online, according to researchers with the project.

While traditional literacy rates appear to be climbing in schools, researchers say the ability of students to read, understand, and decipher online material requires a unique skill set--qualities many of today's students have yet to grasp.

The two-state project aims to change that.

Donald Leu, director of UConn's New Literacies Research Lab, and his team are focusing their efforts on economically disadvantaged seventh-grade students at six urban schools across five Connecticut districts. Their counterparts at Clemson University in South Carolina will take a similar approach to economically disadvantaged seventh graders from rural community settings.

The project consists of three phases. In the first phase, researchers interviewed roughly 1,500 students between the two states about their in-school and at-home internet use. This school year, in phase two, researchers will use a custom-built instructional model to teach critical internet reading and evaluation skills to participating students. Year three will evaluate the effectiveness of this instruction.

The instructional model that Leu's team will be using is based on a reciprocal teaching model developed by a University of Michigan researcher. This reciprocal approach centers on the idea that reading comprehension is a process that happens inside a reader's head, unseen by others, which makes it difficult for teachers to teach to students.

Through this model, teachers read aloud to students and essentially "show" them how they think while reading by talking about what the words mean and what they think will happen next. Then, teachers hand the task over to their students, who read aloud and are forced to think about their reading and why they do the things they do while reading.

The New Literacies research team is adopting this reciprocal model, but is fine-tuning it for internet reading comprehension. The difficulty, Leu said, is that

in text-based reading, students read the same book together. In internet research, students are not necessarily finding the same web pages with their search results, so the research team is working on different ways for students to talk aloud through their research--whether they print out their search results and bring them to the class, or perhaps recreate their search on a laptop for the team to observe.

Although they share many of the features of traditional literacy skills, online reading skills are vastly different in many ways, Leu said. The internet--and particularly search engines--present students with a whole new type of reading comprehension they must master.

For example, "you have to make inferences about things such as the bolded text and the URL," Leu explained. "Eighty percent of adolescents don't read Google search-engine results, largely because they don't know how to read them or to figure out which hit is the one that will help them."

Also, most students simply aren't taught to be critical evaluators of information, he said, adding: "The reason they don't have critical evaluation skills is because what they read at school is already filtered and understood to be true." But online, where anyone can publish anything, the ability to distinguish credible information is key.

In a striking example of the way students are failing to learn this skill, the researchers asked 25 seventh graders from various middle schools to review a web site devoted to a made-up endangered species, called the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus. All but one student fell for the hoax, and all but one said the site was "very credible."



[www.eschoolnews.com](http://www.eschoolnews.com)

[info@eschoolnews.com](mailto:info@eschoolnews.com)

7920 Norfolk Ave., Suite 900

Bethesda, MD 20814

(800) 394-0115 - Fax (301) 913-0119

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Manage your FREE eSchool News eMail subscriptions here](#)

Contents Copyright 2006 eSchool News. All rights reserved.